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Wet Footprints

Lee Magness
jlmagness@milligan.edu

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Wet Footprints

A Reading on Baptism and the Lord's Supper

LEE MAGNESS

This reading reflects on the interwoven features of the Lord's Supper and Christian baptism, by narrating the links between a child's baptism and first communion. It reminds us of the connections between Jesus' death and resurrection; our responses to both through baptism and communion; and the connections between our baptisms and our regular gatherings at the table. The reading is configured here for three voices: a father (reader 1), a mother (reader 2), and a preacher (reader 3).

All The child wanted to be baptized.

1 I was suspicious
 that she just wanted to be able to sit at the table,
 to share the Lord's Supper,
 not be skipped, left out, handed over or around or behind,
 when it came to communion,
 with her family and friends and fellow believers.

2 I was suspicious,
 having once wanted the same thing myself—baptism—
 for simply the same reason—communion.

3 I was suspicious,
 but I was also certain,
 certain that she certainly had heard the gospel,
 that she was good at explaining the good news,
 that she had a sense of sin, and of salvation,
 that she knew what it meant to make a promise, a pledge,
 that she loved the Lord, and the Lord's people,
 and loved being loved by the Lord, and the Lord's people,
 that she knew, at least on the surface, that when she broke the water's surface—
 both times—she was sharing Jesus' death and burial and resurrection,
 that she had some sense that a new life loomed, a Lord-like life.

1,2 We were suspicious,
but we also thought,
1 What better reason to be baptized—
2 for us to be incorporated into Christ, into his death—
1 than to share the supper—
2 for Christ to be incorporated into us, body and blood?

All A child wanted to be baptized,
1,2 so we set our suspicions aside,
said yes to our certainty,
3 and set things in motion—
the conversations, the consultations,
the searching of scriptures, and of hearts.

All We set things in motion—
3 the date that would become the day of her birth,
the people who would fill the baptistery, warm the water, position the towels,
2 the ones who would greet her and gown her and calm her and conduct her,
those who would welcome her, all wet and shivery,
all wondering at the wonderful thing that had just happened,
and wondering that in a sense nothing had happened,
1 those who would welcome her in a tight-toweled, tousle-haired embrace.

All There were other considerations—
3 the song of commitment, the walk down the aisle, strangely bride-like to greet the groom,
1 the words of confession, profession, words about Jesus,
2 almost drowned out, as it should be, by the shared profession of the congregation.

All A child wanted to be baptized,
and was.
3 It went as planned—well—
with the right words, from me and from her,
the right level of dignity and warmth, as the level of the warm water rose and fell around us,
just deep enough, no sputtering, the affirmation of hands and lips,
“Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me,”
2 hoping she heard,
with all that water still pooled in her ears, and all that wonder in her eyes.

3 It had gone as planned—well—
and it was now, well, in the hands of others.
I had done my part, the priestly part,
ministering to her spiritual needs, administering the ceremony.

1 We had done our part, the parental part, the pastoral part,
the shepherding of a young sheep to the quiet waters of salvation.

2 Others—family and friends—would surround her, still damp but smiling,
relatives smothering her until she politely wriggled away.

1 Others—elders—would wait for her at the table,
to share with her the Lord's Supper,
the communion she had craved.

2 Still others—the community of believers still practicing their partnership—
 would speak a kind word,
 relative strangers that they were, *relative* strangers.

3 I re-attired myself, tired after a morning of ministry,
 and parted my hair—I had done my part—
 and chanced up onto the chancel to say hi to the hangers-around.

All That was when we noticed.

3 There they were, clear as day on the night-blue carpet—
 wet footprints.

1 The child had wound her way from the room off the baptistery,
 clad in fresh clothes, hair only damp, feet bare,
 across the platform to the little knot of people encircling the table.

2 The path was plain,
 darkening the already dark carpet,
 step after step, from the baptistery to the table,
 one wet foot after the other,

1 a line of small, wet footprints,
 leading directly from the water to the bread and the wine.

3 And that was when I saw, as it were, another line of wet footprints,
 leading from the muddy Jordan to the mount near Jerusalem.
 “This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ.
 He did not come by water alone, but by water and blood.
 And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.
 For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water, and the blood.”

2 That line of wet footprints led from Jordan to Jerusalem,
 past Cana and its water turning to wine,
 through Samaria and its living water,
 around Galilee and its basketsful of bread.

1 They led through Bethany, wet with Mary’s anointing,
 across the Mount of Olives, wet with Jesus’ own tears,
 up to the upper room where bread and wine became body and blood.

2 They led across the pavement of the Praetorium,
 all wet and slippery from his own blood,

1 and up gory Golgotha,
 where the words slipped through his thirsty throat and lapped over his bloody lips,
 It is finished.

3 That's when I looked back at the carpet and the wet footprints,
 wondering if I could see another set, larger, fainter, bloodier,
 or wondering if the footprints I saw were someone else's all along, deep and indelible,
 that have always led from the baptistery to the table,
 or wondering if I could see a second set doubling back on itself,
 from the river to the upper room to the resurrection,
 from life to death to new life.
 And that's when I rushed down through the auditorium, and out,
 only to see the taillights of the family van,
 wishing I had caught the child, wishing I had thought to say,
 “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you,
 leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”

LEE MAGNESS STILL TEACHES GREEK AND NEW TESTAMENT PART-TIME AT MILLIGAN COLLEGE AND EMMANUEL CHRISTIAN SEMINARY IN RETIREMENT AFTER FORTY-SIX YEARS OF FULL-TIME TEACHING. HIS LIFE IS A TUG-OF-WAR BETWEEN THE MOUNTAINS OF EAST TENNESSEE AND FOUR GRANDCHILDREN IN THE MID-ATLANTIC. ALTHOUGH HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN CONSCIOUS OF BEING BAPTIZED AT THE SAME CHURCH WHERE HIS GRANDFATHER WHOSE NAME HE SHARES HAD BEEN BAPTIZED, THE REALIZATION WAS NEVER STRONGER THAN THE DAY HE BAPTIZED HIS GRAND-DAUGHTER, LEIGH MAGNESS, AT THE SAME CHURCH. THE WET FOOTPRINTS CONTINUE (JLMAGNESS@MILLIGAN.EDU).